Pixelvetica - Management Summary

The work carried out within the Pixelvetica project provides an initial review of video game heritage in Switzerland. This study shows that video games are rarely considered as an integral part of cultural and audiovisual heritage by cultural institutions. The Pixelvetica project establishes a series of recommendations aimed at offering clear paths for the future, in order to ensure that video games are adequately taken care of within archives, libraries and museums.

Such responsibility requires a strong political will beforehand, as well as the implementation of a concerted conservation strategy supported by political authorities. For this purpose, we recommend to establish a legal deposit for video game works, among many solutions. More generally, the necessary steps to guarantee the medium-term preservation of video game heritage in Switzerland are: a governance plan involving specific institutions (existing or to be created) on the basis of defined mandates, the creation and maintenance of a network of experts, and a comprehensive training program specifically targeting actors in cultural heritage.

Therefore, the recommendations expressed to institutions, field actors and creators require a significant political and financial commitment in order to be implemented on a national scale. The report "Les jeux vidéo. Un domaine de la création culturelle en développement", approved by the Federal Council in March 2018, was a milestone in the cultural acknowledgment of video games and the importance of their conservation by the federal political authorities. That said, four years later, it is clear that video game preservation has hardly evolved on Swiss territory, except for the targeted initiatives that we had the opportunity to describe in the report. No concerted preservation strategy on a national scale has been initiated yet. Even cantons funding video game creation, such as canton of Vaud, are late to address the video game conservation and preservation issue in Switzerland.

It should also be noted that Switzerland has all the necessary resources, in terms of skills, infrastructure and equipment, to actively participate in the development of sustainable strategies for saving video game heritage. The Pixelvetica project brought to light the existence of several international networks at the crossroads of research, heritage and communities of practice. Their current activities are highly instructive. Switzerland's inclusion in these international networks would help to promote and accelerate the development of a local preservation strategy for digital material.

The Pixelvetica report shows that Switzerland is late in preserving its video game heritage, but it also demonstrates the presence of many competent actors who could make a decisive contribution to the launch of a heritage strategy for video games in Switzerland. In addition to the communities of practice and collectors who have valuable knowledge about these objects, Switzerland has a dynamic research network in video game studies. It is also home to specialised heritage institutions, such as the ENTER Museum and the Bolo Museum, which have built up a wealth of knowledge and experience in computer and digital media preservation. Better acknowledgement of the value and expertise of these institutions by public authorities, together with funding for a national network of video game expertise, would quickly allow for the implementation of concrete and sustainable preservation initiatives.

The Pixelvetica survey submitted to nearly 250 institutions in Switzerland revealed that few of them possess video games in their collections, and that these objects usually go under the institutional radar. In most cases, heritage institutions consider that the conservation of video

games exceeds their mandate, or feel helpless in front of digital and interactive objects. The survey also showed a strong interest in learning about how to handle video games and in having an access to information and specialised training on video game documentation and preservation.

The situation’s analysis in Switzerland and abroad also highlighted the significant complexity of video game conservation. One of the first pitfalls is the diversity of objects and traces involved in the social and cultural practices of video games. As an interactive practice, video game practice is by its very nature open to an infinite number of variations, and produces a variety of paths with highly variable contours, depending on the era, the genre and the game mechanisms mobilised.

Furthermore, this interactivity is materially presented through often complex technical devices, comprising different computer devices and machines. The preservation of a video game and its accessibility requires the conservation of the machines, peripheral devices and media allowing the game to be 'played'. Alternatively, 'simulating' the operation of this entire technical chain is obviously possible, and we had occasion to describe the advantages, as well as the limitations, of such an approach.

Finally, a video game also produces "non-game" material (design documents, texts, images, etc.) in the form of various documents whose conservation corresponds to established methods with known typologies.

Therefore, the constitution of an interdisciplinary competences’ network at the interface of archival science, computer science, video game studies and historical sciences, seems necessary in order to pursue the exploration and implementation of appropriate video game preservation in Switzerland. Given its experience and expertise in the field of audiovisual heritage, the Memoriav association could ensure the coordination of efforts to preserve video games in Switzerland.

Such a drive would include initiatives related to video games within a large-scale heritage strategy, while achieving economies of scale by mobilising existing resources within the association's network. Concrete implementation strategies include the coordination of a group of experts to act as a relay for the institutions and actors involved or, in the long-term, the creation of a "video game" section within Memoriav's organisation chart.

The Pixelvetica project was a first step towards an exploratory study of the conditions, advantages and limits of the acknowledgement of video games in Switzerland as cultural heritage. As mentioned above, there is still a need for in-depth work on a legal framework for the conservation and sharing of video games in Switzerland, in order to provide the best possible guidance to institutions and political authorities wishing to undertake initiatives in this field. We hope that the dynamics initiated within this project, as well as the contacts made, notably within the two workshops organised in collaboration with Memoriav, will serve as a basis for pursuing this crucial research in developing a preservation strategy adapted to a multi-faceted object, while taking into account the specificities of the Swiss context.

While we thought that in the initial phase of this project we would meet reservations about the importance of preserving Swiss video games, particularly within established heritage institutions, it turned out that the project and its missions were received with great interest and goodwill. Of course, Switzerland is not a major video game producer. However, our work within Pixelvetica led us to identify - and in some cases to rescue and document - a number of Swiss video game productions that were doomed to oblivion.

Based on the examples of the Swedish and Australian contexts (presented in the Pixelvetica report), the Swiss video game heritage has been forgotten mostly due to the absence of preservation and research initiatives. The progressive and meticulous construction of a "local

history" of video games in Switzerland is still possible today and even seems to take shape. It is worth noting that a group of researchers recently obtained a Sinergia (SNSF) funding totalling CHF 3,1M to study over a period of four years the history of video games and game design in Switzerland from 1968 to 2000.[1] This is a significant milestone for the history of video games in Switzerland, which comes on top of the recent interest shown by the *cantonal* Libraries of Lausanne and Fribourg for the documentation and preservation of local video games.

Such initiatives are taking place at a moment when the video game industry in Switzerland is strengthening: we observe a constant increase in the number of game development studios and professional training courses related to video game professions. The launch of ambitious initiatives for video game preservation will guarantee appropriate care for both video games currently in the making and video games made in Switzerland over the last fifty years, in the latter case thanks to the artefacts still available today. We hope that the observations and analysis made in the context of the Pixelvetica project will contribute to future initiatives for the preservation of Swiss video games.

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